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Leiden  
The Netherlands

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Lawtoo, N.

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# Hypermimetic Police Violence: Racist Somatechnics in the Case of Rayshard Brooks

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Nidesh Lawtoo

**Abstract:**

Extending the new field of mimetic studies to the racist somatechnics of police violence against minorities in the United States, this article focuses on the specific case of the police murder of Rayshard Brooks in 2020 (Atlanta, Georgia) to account for the complex interplay of somatic, technical, and mimetic factors that triggered his murder. I argue that this exemplary case calls for a diagnostic of the patho(-)logical vortex of contagious violence that entangles racist triggers, unconscious bodily actions and reactions, as well as the agentic power of guns qua technical 'actants.' While this hypermimetic spiral of violence escapes conscious control, it generates unconscious pathologies internal to racist violence in general and to the somatechnics of police violence in particular.

**Keywords:** racism; police violence; racist somatechnics; hypermimesis; mimetic unconscious.

The genealogical connection between violence and mimesis is far from new, let alone original; yet this does not mean that the mirroring relation between these entangled problematics should not be rethought for our contemporary, hypermimetic times. In the wake of the growing threat of

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conspiracy theories, algorithmic manipulations, Big Lie scenarios that go viral online before triggering (new) fascist insurrections, authoritarian invasions, and escalating wars offline, it is clear that humans are not only driven by a rational *logos* based on the abstract ideal of *Homo Sapiens*; they are also increasingly vulnerable to an irrational *pathos* generative of contagious pathologies constitutive of an immanent, embodied, and eminently imitative creature we call *homo mimeticus*. While imitation is a phenomenon that goes beyond good and evil insofar as it can be put to both constructive and destructive use, it all too easily triggers racist, xenophobic, sexist, neofascist and authoritarian forms of violence that, in the wake of the pandemic crisis, cast a shadow on the body politics in general and on subaltern bodies in particular. Most visibly, the phantom of imitation haunts the growing number of police murders of racial minorities (especially, but not only, African Americans) that continue to plague the United States, even in the aftermath of Black Lives Matter protests across the world. Hence the urgency to revisit the problematic of mimetic, or as I shall call it, hypermimetic violence in light of the affective, technologically mediated (most notably by guns), yet also material and embodied transformations this special issue urges us to consider.

At first sight, approaching the problem of contemporary violence in general and of police violence in particular from the angle of an ancient Greek concept like ‘*mimēsis*’ might surprise. This surprise is subsequently redoubled in the context of a journal that aims to go beyond metaphysical dualisms that posit an idealist split between the ideal world and the material world. At least since Plato, *mimesis* was reduced to a debased phenomenal and thus illusory representation of a more ideal, abstract, and supposedly universal reality. If one of the general goals of *Somatechnics* is to affirm a ‘space for the thinking, naming and performance of the differential articulations of technologies of bodies’ (Perera and Pugliese 2011: 3), then, convoking a concept traditionally linked to ontological binaries that divide visual technologies of representations from material bodies represented might require a word of explanation at minimum and a radical reframing of *mimesis* at best. Since such a reframing is already internal to the transdisciplinary field of ‘mimetic studies’ (Lawtoo 2022), I opt for a minimal redefinition first, so as to get as quickly as possible to the problematic of police violence that concerns us.

Once *mimesis* is brought back in touch with the immanent, somatic, but also technical capacities of *homo mimeticus*, it can serve as a diagnostic lens to account for police murders that seem, at first sight, deprived of any reason, logic or *logos*, yet operate according to

paradoxical patho(-)logical principles that are double-sided: on the pathological side, police murders are all too often symptomatic of racist, violent, and criminal social pathologies that infect the body politic. On the other, less visible, patho-*logical* side they are also animated by a *logos* on affects or *pathos* constitutive of the hypermimetic powers of somatechnics at play in individual bodies. Once both sides are joined, a Janus-faced critical and clinical – that is, patho(-)logical – picture of the somatechnics of police violence begins to appear.

### **Mimetic Studies: Violence and Imitation Reframed**

For a long time, a dominant tradition in western thought restricted mimesis to an idealist metaphysics that set up ontological boundaries between original and copies, true realities and illusory phantoms, subjects representing the world and techniques of representation of such a world, or nature, generating shadows of reality that, from the origins of philosophy onward, received contradictory and often competing evaluations. It is in fact well known that, at least since Plato's *Republic*, a dominant idealist tradition framed mimesis within the logic of the 'mirror' (Plato 1963: 566d) that splits the world between ideal Forms and their earthly instantiations, the universal and the particular, the intelligible world from the phenomenal world and, by extension, minds from bodies, including bodies manipulating particular techniques of representation that generate material 'phantoms' (598b) or simulations in place of ideal realities. Dominant up to the past century, this metaphysical tradition that restricts mimesis to the logic of representation has – in the wake of Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of metaphysics – been effectively 'overturned' (Deleuze 1969: 292; own translation) and 'deconstructed' (Derrida 1981). Thus, the 'phantom' or the 'simulation' brings the original model into being – as simulacrum.

It is less known that already for Plato, a different yet not less important conception of *mimēsis* (from *mîmos*, actor or performance) was inextricably related to violence. In the fourth century BC mimesis was first and foremost 'performed' by embodied actors, or mimes, on a theatrical stage. Mimetic actors would thus impersonate violent and fascinating mythic figures (say, Achilles) with pathos rather than represent static and rather boring objects (say, a table) to be seen from a distance. It is in fact crucial to realise that Plato's preoccupations with violent scenes from the *Iliad*, such as the wrath of Achilles, or from Hesiod's *Theogony* (say, the castration of Uranus) concern the education of the guardians, which he foregrounds since Books II of *Republic*. Already for Plato, at stake is the education of the police force in a just

city – an old problem that reaches, via police violence, into the present. This also means that Plato’s suspicion of mimesis, and its eventual exclusion of the *polis*, is informed by ethical and political concerns with the contagious effects of violent impersonations that serve as models for the city police force to imitate.

Going beyond mind/body dualisms dominant in western thought since Descartes, then, Plato was among the first to recognise that theatrical dramatisations have the power to form and transform the nature of the audience into what he calls ‘second nature’ (Plato 1961: 395d): that is, a plastic, malleable, and impressionable nature which is no longer either purely cultural or natural insofar as mimetic performances already trouble the essential nature of what the subject ‘is,’ or is supposed to ‘become.’ To be sure, the media have changed since the times of Plato, and so have the violent models to imitate. We have moved from epic and theatrical models to cinematic and televised models, from ancient tragedies staged to video games played. Yet, the problem of media violence and the contagious effects it unconsciously triggers in individuals under the hypnotic spell of a digital culture still benefit from being inscribed in a genealogy of thinkers sensitive to the embodied effects of hypermimetic technics of representation.

On a different, agonistic, yet genealogically related front, Aristotle defended mimesis in the *Poetics* as a rational art or *technē* of representation that dramatises violent actions in mythic fiction, but whose carefully crafted structure, or plot (*muthos*) is predicated on ‘universal’ laws of ‘causality’ and ‘necessity’ that, he argues, contra Plato, are ‘more philosophical and more serious than history’ (Aristotle 1987: 41). Thus reframed, mimesis might even generate an enigmatic *katharsis* (37) of pathological emotions in an audience now supposedly purified or purged of violent affects. How? The philological riddle of catharsis remains, to this day, unsolved. Still, it is significant that the mythic plot that supposedly generates catharsis is modelled on Greek tragedy in general and *Oedipus Rex* in particular. Rendered popular by Sigmund Freud’s ‘cathartic method’ (Freud and Breuer 1955), this medical interpretation of catharsis continues to misinform contemporary theories of mimesis that frame violence within universal Oedipal structures of desire, rivalry, and scapegoating mechanisms (Girard 1977, Lawtoo 2023a).

While scapegoating effects directed against innocent sacrificial victims are certainly still operative on a massive scale in an age haunted by (new) fascist leaders that made it vital to affirm, yet again, that Black Lives Matter too, police violence certainly does not generate any cathartic effects. On the contrary, violence tends to circulate from

online simulations to embodied subjects, algorithmic influences online to material actions and reactions offline that have mimetic, or rather, hypermimetic effects on subjects in generals and marginalised subjects in particular. I call hypermimetic violence a type of violence that is not simply realistic, nor solely hyperreal, but both. Thus, hypermimesis designates a complex, spiralling movement whereby 'hyperreal simulations' (Baudrillard 1981) that may have nothing to do with reality as such, as Jean Baudrillard noted, have the power to retroact on material bodies and minds, induce actions and reactions, with all too violent effects in real life. In sum, contemporary manifestations of violence do not remain contained within the stabilising frame of visual representations or postmodern dissolutions of reality; they equally do not lend themselves to transhistorical theoretical frames predicated on cathartic solutions. Hence the need for a new theory of imitation to account for the emergence of contagious phenomena that – from (new) fascism to conspiracy theories, algorithmic violence online to racist, sexist and transphobic violence offline, among other hypermimetic phenomena – haunt, phantom-like, the contemporary age.

Mimetic studies developed in dialogic collaboration with major figures in perspectives as diverse as continental philosophy (Jean-Luc Nancy, Catherine Malabou), new materialism (William Connolly), literary theory (J. Hillis Miller), feminism (Adriana Cavarero), the history of psychology (Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen), posthumanism (Katherine Hayles), and neuroscience (Vittorio Gallese), among other contemporary thinkers that provide alternatives to universalising theories of representation.<sup>1</sup> This burgeoning field has also recently re-evaluated both the cathartic and contagious hypotheses that, to this day, inform debates on the effects of media violence in the digital age generating forms of 'hypermimesis' that blur the boundaries between hyperreal violence online and all too real violence offline. Influenced by digital simulations, driven by online conspiracies, manipulated by algorithms, shot through violent ideologies among other emerging pathologies that tap into the violent physio-psychological foundations of the 'mimetic unconscious,' the hypermimetic subject is not in control of the ego. On the contrary, the subject is easily dispossessed by forms of mimetic communication that do not simply represent illusory 'shadows' or 'phantoms' of reality, as Plato indicated; rather, by a reversal of perspective, it is the ego itself that, due to habit, repetition, and good doses of hypnotic dispossessions, turns into what Nietzsche called a 'phantom of the ego' (1982: 105) – that is, a copy, a simulacrum, or phantom that is not consciously in control of its actions but is unconsciously dispossessed by automatic reactions. Perspectival in orientation

and pluralist in its transdisciplinary method that cuts across philosophy and politics, literary theory and cultural studies, media studies and posthuman studies, among other perspectives, the general goal of mimetic studies is to do immanent, situational, and ethical justice to the protean manifestations of a mimetic subject that does not conform to the model of an autonomous, fully agentic, and free ideal of *Homo Sapiens*. Rather, it is sensitive to the embodied, affective, and relational disposition of *homo mimeticus*.<sup>2</sup>

Now, expanding the growing field of mimetic studies to the specific and situated problematic of police brutality against minorities in the US, this article joins forces with the concept of somatechnics to continue breaking down binaries that simply oppose mind and body, techné and soma, self and others, but also subject and object, online actions and embodied reactions. Violence, in fact, often introduces psychotechno-somatic alterations in bodies and minds that operate below conscious awareness, and trigger automatic responses based on bodily habits and mental expectations, including racist expectations that project violence onto innocent others and run deep in the history of western 'civilisation'. It is, in fact, well known that 'racism becomes instrumental, as a somatechnology, in the waging of colonial and imperial wars' (Pugliese and Stryker 2009: 4).<sup>3</sup>

It is equally true that the problem of police violence reveals how racism continues to be exercised in so-called democratic states that wage war against ethnic and racial minorities. As Achille Mbembe observes: 'The hitherto more or less hidden violence of democracies is rising to the surface' (2019: 6–7), all more visibly so in light of the return of 'aspirational fascism' (Connolly 2017) and '(new) fascist insurrections' (Lawtoo 2019) that unmask how the shadow of racism never ceased to haunt democratic countries. On the contrary, police violence reveals 'how deeply rooted and resistant racist habits can be' (Pedwell 2021: 62) generating what Alexander Weheliye calls 'racializing assemblages' that defines race 'as a set of sociopolitical processes that discipline humanity into full humans, not-quite humans, and nonhumans' (2014: 4). Thus construed, what I call racist somatechnics is far from an essentialist or universal category but, rather, operates as a social, cultural, and technologically mediated instrument of power to subjugate black bodies and lives.

Empirical studies have long ascertained 'a consistent pattern of disparities in police violence against racial and ethnic minorities across countries and contexts' (Dukes and Kahn, 2017: 792), a disparity most visible in the US against African American victims who, in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and many others mobilised Black Lives Matter

protests across the globe. Judith Butler recently commented on Floyd's murder: 'the spectacle of his killing was a shameless advertisement for white supremacy, a resurgence of lynching explicitly performed for the cell phone video' (2022: 51). To further this diagnostic beyond the logic of mimetic representation, I consider a less-discussed police murder that, while also captured on camera, has so far not received the specific attention it deserves. The case of Rayshard Brooks – a 27-year-old African American man killed by a police officer in Atlanta, Georgia in 2020 after he was found sleeping in his car – is worth revisiting. His death was left unpunished and was not officially recognised as murder (for legal reasons); yet it nevertheless unmasks the vulnerability of black lives in the US who, in specific circumstances we shall have to carefully consider, come close to occupying the status of "bare life" characteristic of what Giorgio Agamben calls *homo sacer*: that is, a 'killable life (*vita uccidibile*)' (1995: 127; own translation), which means it is a life 'whom one can kill without incurring the penalty of murder' (Weheliye 2014: 33).<sup>4</sup>

As we shall see, this black *homo sacer* is caught in a contagious somatechnics of violence that is also characteristic of *homo mimeticus*. Brooks' murder is not only representative of the ubiquity of police killings of minorities; it also reveals a 'shooter bias' predicated on 'racial stereotypes' against African Americans, Latinos, and other racial minorities that is now well attested in the social sciences' (Correll et al. 2014) at the macro social level. And yet, in the wake of subjects shot while escaping, sleeping, or simply knocking on doors, this racist bias still urgently requires a theoretical supplement attentive to the hypermimetic, technosomatic forces that operate imperceptibly, at the micro level, on bodies and minds, yet generate visible effects for Black lives. These forces are part of what Mbembe calls 'a form of organization of death' for it is generative of a 'terror that is molecular in essence and allegedly defensive ... seeking legitimation by blurring the relation between violence, murder, and the law' (2019: 7). Hence the urgency to diagnose the molecular, hypermimetic actions and reactions that entangle armed (white) subjects and unarmed (Black) subjects, but also bodies and minds, actors (policemen) and actants (guns) caught in a spiralling hypermimetic loop that can easily turn a police action into a murderous reaction, a living person into a dead body.

### **Police Patho(-)Logies: Reframing the Case of Rayshard Brooks**

To give specificity to a situational diagnostic representative of police violence contra African Americans in the US, I focus on the case of

Brooks' police murder for a number of reasons: first, the shooting was captured on camera and allows for a precise situational close reading of the process of emergence of police violence; second, it exemplifies<sup>5</sup> the tragedy of a routine check that goes wrong as conscious actions based on reason or *logos* are overtaken by unconscious mimetic reactions based on affect or *pathos* triggered by a racist pathology still in need of a diagnostic, or patho-*logy*; and third, this patho(-)logy reveals how bodies, minds, and technologies are entangled in a complex spiralling logic in which the gun is not simply in the hands of a volitional subject – though ethical responsibility remains firmly rooted on the side of the armed subject; instead, mediating technologies such as guns and their simulacra such as tasers operate as what Bruno Latour calls 'actants' with agentic properties of their own that are not deprived of mimetic, or rather hypermimetic effects. Let us thus reopen this case to do justice, if not to the tragic case of Brooks itself, at least with the patho(-)logical somatic-technical-mimetic dynamic that led up to it.

In Atlanta, Georgia, June 2020, Rayshard Brooks, a 27-year-old African American man, was shot and killed by a white policeman (Garrett Rolfe). His example points to hypermimetic mechanisms of misrecognition that do not remain confined within an imaginary mirror stage, as psychoanalysts would say. On the contrary, they set in motion a chain of suggestive mirroring physio-psychological actions and reactions that are not under the full control of consciousness and belong to the register of the 'mimetic unconscious' (Lawtoo 2023b). This violent unconscious dynamic also distributes agency across the subject/object divide via a multiplicity of 'actants' or nonhuman 'technical mediations' (Latour 1994: 33) that trouble boundaries dividing subject and object, technology and humans, *techne* and bodies, and are thus operating via the transgressive logic of somatechnics. Examples include guns and tasers, which, in a spiralling techno-somatic sequence, can easily escape conscious human control, revealing the agentic power of technologies of death. In the process, they can also trigger a type of hypermimetic violence that, in a deeply racist society dominated by equally racist media misrepresentations, can make the difference between life and death – as we shall see.

The police murder of Brooks was recorded from a variety of perspectives (bodycam, witness phone camera, security camera) and provides a realistic representation of the events we can reconstruct from a distance.<sup>6</sup> The general context is the following: Brooks was noted asleep in his own car in the drive-through of a fast-food restaurant (Wendy's) in Atlanta, Georgia. His car was blocking a drive-through lane; rather than waking him up, a typically mediated North American

response ensues: an employee at the restaurant calls the police. In an informed analysis of Brooks's killing, South African comedian Trevor Noah points to the fundamental problem, as he asks: 'Why are armed police dealing with a man sleeping in his car?' (2020). The answer cannot be dissociated from the fact that 'racial minorities are over-represented as criminals or perpetrators compared to their White counterparts in the media' (Dukes and Gaither 2017: 790), thereby rendering the problematic of police violence against minorities inextricably entangled with media misrepresentations. Direct causation is of course very difficult to prove; whether there is correlation with psycho-somatic reflex responses to Black bodies in real life we will examine later. What is certain is that race is immediately in the foreground as the operator repeatedly asks: 'Is he Black?' (0:40). The answer is positive, and a police officer arrives in a short time, requesting a second officer who can perform a sobriety test. The second officer (Garrett Rolfe) arrives; Brooks is ordered to step out of the car. What starts as a routine procedure turns into a disquieting sequence of events we shall have to analyse in detail.

The initial exchange is cordial; Brooks is fully cooperative and Rolfe follows protocol. Asked whether he would take a sobriety breath test, Brooks immediately admits he had been drinking and suggests himself, in a calm tone of voice, that he 'could walk home' (4:14). It is important to note that Brooks was on probation after two years in prison and had confronted difficulties reintegrating into society and finding work. This typical situation renders his case, like so many victims of police violence – from Eric Garner to Freddy Gray – vulnerable to a racist criminalisation based on a disconcerting mirroring inversion of perspectives. In fact, it all too often serves as a 'rationale for blaming these victims for their own death' and overturning 'sympathy and empathy toward the victim' in favour of the shooter (Dukes and Gaither 2017: 791, 792). It is thus imperative to resist this mimetic reflex triggered by dominant representations in the media.

Legally speaking, Brooks knew that an arrest would lead to the revocation of his probation and to reimprisonment. Rolfe disregards Brooks's suggestion. I note for context that in 2019 Rolfe had been honoured by the organisation 'Mothers against Driving Drunk' for making more than fifty driving under the influence (DUI) arrests; every arrest counts. He insists on Brooks taking the sobriety test. Brooks eventually complies, saying: 'I don't want to refuse anything' (4:34). He predictably tests positive, 0.108, which is slightly above the tolerated limit, namely 0.8 (5:08). Let us recall that the investigation started not because he was driving under the influence but because he was sleeping

in his car. What follows is in no way an exoneration for DUI or for transgressing driving regulations that in most industrialised countries are effectively enforced via stringent fines; rather the analysis takes issue with a police brutality representative of the way violence operates on Black bodies.

The exchange so far lasted over forty minutes and remained polite throughout. But a change of speed and intensity is about to take place. An escalation of violent bodily actions, rather than linguistic signs, suddenly comes into play. It will last forty-five seconds, and it unfolds as follows: without preliminary notification, Rolfe moves behind Brooks's back and tries to handcuff him with the assistance of the second officer. Brooks resists the arrest, and a physical struggle ensues (see 5:50–6:25). The three entangled bodies now fall to the ground, and one cop uses a taser qua mediating technology to discharge an electric shock to Brooks's body, who, in a reactive move triggered by the somatechnical actant, manages to wrest the taser out of the cop's hand. Brooks takes possession of the taser, fires back, and breaks free, starting to run for his life ... until his run is stopped short – and so is his life. Rolfe fatally shoots Brooks three times, hitting him twice in the back (6:35).

Once we partially recover from the pathos of this scene the viewer is left to wonder from an interpretative distance: how can falling asleep in one's car, even on the service lane – just like owning a pocketknife (Freddie Gray), paying with a twenty-dollar counterfeit bill (George Floyd), or sleeping in one's house (Breonna Taylor) – lead to a murder perpetrated by an armed police force (Plato's 'guardians') supposedly representing 'justice' in the *polis* and paid to protect people? Each case is different and deserves a specific, situational analysis but what is certain from this example is that something has gone wrong in the education of the so-called guardians of the polis. Equally clear is that a multiplicity of racist-ideological-legal-historical-cultural-economic and thus systemic forces play a major role: from the decision to call the police instead of waking Brooks up to Rolfe's decision to test him for sobriety although Brooks was not driving, from the former's choice not to let Brooks walk or perhaps accompany him home, to the decision of arresting him without notice, a number of intentional and premediated choices based on interpretations (un)consciously informed by an all-pervasive racist ideology are indeed made by the police officer in question. Like a spiderweb, systemic racism generates a capillary network that entangles Black subjects in a web of power relations, which are clearly the decisive factors that *lead up* to the tragedy.

And yet, if systemic racism leads up to it, an unconscious somatic, technological and hypermimetic patho(-)logical supplement is still

needed to trigger the shooting itself. To culminate in murder, racist ideology and police practices also need to be redoubled by a violent pathos that is intersubjective, hierarchical, and relational in nature, yet effectively takes pathological possession of egos turning them into phantom egos. This violent pathos has the power to dispossess subjects (both oppressors and oppressed) of their capacity to think rationally on the basis of logos. It does so by doubling the spell of racist ideology with the immediacy of a viscerally felt, reflex, and unconscious pathos triggered by a somatechnical mediation. As the physical struggle ensues, in fact, an unforeseen intersubjective, reciprocal, and mirroring dynamic centred on weapons (a taser first, a gun later) quickly unfolds. It takes possession of all subjects involved, albeit differently, given the hierarchical and violent power-structure, depriving each embodied perspective of conscious control over an autonomous intentional will.

Nietzsche's critique of the limits of conscious will in human actions in general is worth recalling here for it remains relevant to account for the unconscious dynamic of violent actions. He argues in a passage of *The Gay Science*:

Every thoughtless person is convinced that will alone is effective; that willing is something simple, a brute datum, underivable, and intelligible by itself. He is convinced that when he does something – strike something, for example – it is he that strikes, and that he did strike because he *willed* it. He does not see any problem here: the feeling of *will* seems sufficient to him not only for the assumption of cause and effect, but also for the faith that he *understands* their relationship. He knows nothing of the mechanism of what happened and of the hundredfold fine work that needs to be done to bring about the strike. (1974: §127, 183)

There is indeed an affective will qua mimetic pathos Nietzsche also calls will to power that does not rest on a conscious, volitional, fully rational, and autonomous subject. Rather, it calls into play a multiplicity of affective, interpretative, and, we should add, technologically mediated yet not less immediate processes that operate below the register of consciousness yet motivate effective 'strikes' nonetheless. Every person who tried their hand at – or even only watched – any sports should be familiar with these strikes. Our bodies, especially if well trained, can operate with a speed that far exceeds conscious awareness, an unconscious speed that is reinforced by habits and can be entangled with a technical mediation, say a bat, racket, or weapon (spears, sabres, rifles ...). While free will is questioned in Nietzsche's diagnostic, a basic familiarity with sports should show that it does not exonerate subjects from being responsible for violent actions or reactions. Any referee will confirm this.

But the problem with violence in the real world and police violence in the US in particular is that there is no referee in sight to guarantee fair adherence to equal social rules. The police operate instead as an active participant in the implementation of violence disproportionately directed against African Americans and ethnic and racial minorities who, to this day, are privileged target of ‘techniques of domination, dispossession, expropriation, exploitation and violence’ (Weheliye 2014: 3–4). In this particular agonistic, hierarchical, and murderous struggle, violent mirroring reflexes are triggered by a spiral of reciprocal movements and interpretations of movements that go beyond simple causal willing, generating an escalation of violence that cuts both ways – in this case, both against Brooks. Given the ‘hundredfold fine work’ internal to such mirroring actions and reactions, we need to radically slow down the scene to analyse it in slow motion. Here the close-reading skills essential for analysing mimetic fictions in literary, film, and media studies turn out to be essential for analysing hypermimetic realities in new mimetic studies as well.

### **Hypermimetic Reactions: Close Reading Somatechnics**

As in any mirroring actions and reactions the two sides are inextricably intertwined for both policeman and victim are caught in the same somatechnics of violence. However, since they embody diametrically opposed positions of power, we need to reconsider each perspective separately, and in slow motion, before joining them in a single Janus-faced patho(-)logical diagnostic.

On the side of the victim, we have seen that Brooks makes a reasonable request to Rolfe in a polite and compliant tone that indicates his willingness and intention to cooperate. At the same time, he has been asleep, is under the influence of alcohol, and finds himself in an altered state of consciousness receptive to mimetic influences with the power to take possession of his wilful actions. As is well known, alcohol is an intoxicating substance that amplifies affective reactions, including aggressive pathos, while also diminishing fear. If ‘willing’ is already influenced by ‘complex’ unconscious processes for a sober subject, this is even truer for an inebriated person. As Noah reminds us, ‘we have all been drunk.’ And he adds: ‘if police cannot respond or handle a drunk person then they should not be responding’ (Noah 2020). This altered state can also potentially increase a receptive sensitivity to the history of racist injustice, aggression, and violence sedimented in the political unconscious of African Americans in general. Brooks’s arrest is, in fact, an instance of a systemic, racist, discriminatory violence that, as Frantz

Fanon notes, has a long colonial history. Thus, he specifies: ‘decolonization is always a violent phenomenon’ as well (2011: 451; own translation).

Furthermore, if we consider that the implications of the arrest, for Brooks, are imprisonment, it is less surprising that the balance between rational distance and irrational pathos at play in his unconscious interpretation of violent police stimuli has the potential to tip in favour of a pathos the subject does not wilfully control; rather, in his state of heightened suggestibility, it can easily take control of his rational faculty instead. This is indeed what happens, on both sides of the struggle. As Rolfe attempts to handcuff Brooks, the latter is taken by surprise as the tenor of the interaction so far has not prepared Brooks for the arrest. As the second officer intervenes, Brooks finds himself in a situation of numerical, physical, psychic, and legal disadvantage that makes racist oppression violently palpable on Black bodies and souls. In this context, rational language or *logos* progressively gives way to the dynamic of bodily affects or *pathos* that is imperceptible yet is the driving force behind this action.

It is in this complex context that a split-second, subliminal decision that defies conscious control leads Brooks to react unconsciously, via an automatic mimetic reflex, to the officer’s deliberate decision to handcuff him. In this state of surprise, the following steps unfold very rapidly: Brooks struggles to break free from the two policemen (and, at one remove, perhaps also from the racist structures that authorise its systemic violence); is subjected to the Taser’s electric discharge, takes possession of the taser, and fires back, hitting the second policeman (perhaps as a mirroring reflex for survival); and he starts to run (perhaps carried by a human instinct to preserve one’s freedom). What was true for colonised subjects in Fanon’s century is still true for African American subjects in this century: ‘the colonized “thing” [‘*chose*’ *colonisée*] becomes human in the very process of liberation’ (2011: 452; own translation). The tragedy is that this process of liberation continues to generate death instead.

We are now in a position to see and perhaps feel too the hypermimetic patho(-)logy of racist somatechnics I have been tracking all along. This mirroring scene blurs the line between outside and inside, but also psychology and physiology, conscious actions and unconscious reactions that operate on both minds and bodies with pathological effects. This process starts with Rolfe pointing and discharging the taser as Brooks is fleeing (6:30). In a mirroring gesture, Brooks turns, points the taser back *as if* it were a gun, and fires his second and last probe (6:31). In yet another mirroring reaction, the officer drops his taser, draws his real gun, and automatically fires three fatal shots in reply (6:32). It is difficult to find a clearer illustration of the mimetic

unconscious, a relational unconscious located in between subjects caught in a mirroring yet radically unbalanced logic of violent escalation. The human bodies are in the hands of technical objects perhaps more than the other way round; these mediating technologies, in fact, pit an empty taser contra a loaded gun, a loaded gun contra an empty taser. And it is this mirroring yet radically unequal confrontation that leads directly to a murderous action. In fact, while the symmetric human dynamic generates sameness in mirroring gestures between policeman and victim, the asymmetry in technical mediation makes, quite literally, the difference between a living person and a dead body.

Let us now consider Garrett's Rolfe's perspective as well. On the other, mirroring side, *contra* Brooks's diplomatic request that he could simply walk home, officer Rolfe sets in motion an unconscious interplay of visceral aggression and fearful interpretations that do not leave much space for tragic sentiments like pity or sympathy. Instead, as Brooks manages to break loose, he generates an irrational fear in the momentarily disempowered officers who are already under the hypermimetic spell of racist misrepresentations of African Americans as dangerous, life-threatening criminals – an imaginary fear since Brooks is unarmed whereas, in a mirroring and all too real inversion, both officers are armed, and one is ready to kill. What follows from the point of view of Rolfe is a classical police chase sequence viewers are familiar with from popular US reality TV series like *Cops* (1989–). One of the longest running TV shows in the country, it represents violent police actions often directed toward African Americans; this fictionalised bias is then redoubled by a racist police training automatically biased contra African Americans as well.

Reframed within the TV show, a predictable script ensues in reality in which Rolfe plays his role with deadly yet totally avoidable consequences. The chase is set off. The cop automatically draws his gun in a scene that breaches basic protocol in reality, for Brooks poses no immediate threat, yet is again hypermimetically in line with typical police scenes at play in a number of cinematic and televised fictions. The violent scenario is indeed classic: a white ('good') cop pursuing a black ('bad') criminal who fires in the name of a ('just') cause. As Latour puts it: 'Each artifact has its script, its "affordance," its potential to take hold of passersby and force them to play roles in its story' (1994: 31). And if this is true for a passerby, how about a subject who already plays his policing role?

At this stage the patho(-)logy of somatechnics takes possession of the ego, generating phantom egos. The line dividing fictional danger and real danger, but also conscious actions and unconscious reactions, physiological reflexes and psychological interpretations, good and evil,

life and death, is now speedily blurred in this hypermimetic spiral: a point immediately confirmed as Rolfe *misinterprets* the now empty taser *as* a loaded weapon. Misinterpretations of mediating technologies are here based on a *méconnaissance* that is neither restricted to narcissistic *imagos* (Jacques Lacan), nor framed in the triangular logic of mimetic desires (René Girard). Instead, it is based on a racist patho(-)logy mediated by a gun (or *techné*) that operates on the body (or *soma*) and soul (*psyche*) of a homo mimeticus. Thus, a mirroring reaction triggered by an imaginary threat generates a real, all too real shooting. Starting from a position of patho-logical interpretative distance, then, the mimetic pathos internal to racist *ideo*-logy has quickly turned into a hypermimetic racist pathology generative of tragic horrors.

### **Coda: Closing the Case**

Finally, if we now join these mirroring perspectives, we should be in a position to disentangle the hypermimetic patho(-)logy that led the officer to misrecognise a taser for a real gun and pull the trigger on a black, naked life turned *homo sacer*. This patho(-)logical misrecognition is not based on the mediation of linguistic signs predicated on the stabilising logic of representation. It is rather based on a bodily mirroring pathos that operates on a more embodied relational register constitutive of the mimetic unconscious. It should be clear by now that this unconscious is no longer modelled on ancient tragedies that generate pity and fear with cathartic properties – though pity and fear continue to be at play as we witness such scenes from a distance. Rather, it is more likely modelled on contemporary fictional but also documentary representations that are not structured as a complex plot, but disproportionately represent, legitimise, and hypermimetically directs police brutality against minority groups in general and African Americans in particular.

Full responsibility is clearly on the side of the gun-holder who is a policeman with a specialised training but also with a history of inappropriately aiming his gun. There is thus no exoneration involved in the present analysis. The justice system of the state of Georgia came, however, to the opposite conclusion: despite a momentary termination of employment, Garrett Rolfe was considered ‘wrongly terminated’ (Young et. al 2021) and ‘reinstated’ as police officer; the Prosecuting Attorneys’ Council of Georgia also ask the following question: ‘was it objectively reasonable that [Rolfe] used deadly force? And we conclude it was’ (Griffin 2022). This mindboggling legal (mis)interpretation should speak volumes to the racist bias internal to US law in the age of BLM. As Noah sums it up, ‘there is one common thread beyond all the ifs

central to this complex case: 'If you weren't black, maybe you would still be alive' (2020). Racism in the police force joins forces with racism in the legal system to keep police murders unpunished and thus subject to hypermimetic repetitions.

In sum, the layers of patho(-)logical confusion that triggered this murder are multiple, complex, and can be summarised as follows. First, Brooks is subjected to a pervasive racist ideology that considers African Americans a priori prone to violence and crime and justifies police violence from a distance (systemic racism). Second, he is caught in a racist double bind between imprisonment and compliance that leads him to shift from a rational discourse (*logos*) to irrational affects (*pathos*). Third, a subliminal and not fully conscious decision is taken under the influence of alcohol and bodily violence to break free via a reflex mimesis that leads to mirroring actions and reactions that are not under the control of consciousness and are in this sense both mimetic and unconscious (mimetic unconscious). Fourth, trapped in this mirroring struggle, violence automatically escalates via the agentic power of technological mediations (tasers, guns) that amplify the power of affects like fear and aggression (mimetic pathos). Fifth, as Brooks starts to run, driven by a will to freedom, he is no longer considered a person for a projection of an imaginary criminal far removed from reality has already taken place; he is now modelled on racist fictions that have been mapped on his body and soul (mimetic phantom). Sixth, as he turns, the line between fiction/reality, conscious action/unconscious reaction, empty taser/loaded gun, illusory violence/real violence is blurred in a somatechnical spiral of confusion in which simulations retroact on the singularity of a human life leading to the real killing of an unarmed, certainly imperfect, but also representative victim of racist violence (hypermimesis).

In the end, the diagnostic re-evaluation presented here goes beyond the case of Rolfe and has general implications for police officers and gun-owners more generally. To move beyond all too human actions and reactions, it is in fact important to take hold of the somatechnic lessons internal to our analysis of racist pathologies. What the case of Brooks teaches us, among other things, is that the taser and the gun are not neutral passive objects to be used by wilful subjects in sovereign, rational control; rather, they have agentic properties of their own in this deadly sequence. As Latour also points out: 'you are a different person with a gun in your hand' (1994: 32–33).

Mimesis, I have argued, plays a key mediation role in the person-gun somatechnical transformation. Subjects are indeed formed and transformed by the objects in our hands we appear to wilfully control yet, in a complex hypermimetic feedback loop, have agentic control on our

actions and reactions as well. Hence the importance of specific training programs that teach officers to counter racist bias reducing black lives to the bare, naked life of *homo sacer*. They should also contain mindless triggering reflexes driven by somatechnics controlling bodies and minds of homo mimeticus rather than the other way round. Until then, the trigger of unconscious violence circulates in the (a)symmetrical composite (non)human actions and reactions in pathological ways that should be under the lens of new mimetic studies.

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## Notes

1. Interviews with these and other contributors to mimetic studies can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/@homvideosercprojecthomomim971/featured>.
2. I discuss the genealogical continuities between affect theory and mimetic studies in relation to violence in more detail in Lawtoo (2023b).
3. Needless to say, racist discrimination intersects with practices of dehumanisation that pertain to class, nationality, gender, and sexual difference as well. For an account of the relation between somatechnics and 'non/human queering' (see also Henriksen and Radomska 2015).
4. Weheliye notes that Agamben's theory of bare life, following Michel Foucault's theory of biopower, did not pay sufficient attention to the role racial, colonial oppression plays in the genealogy of *homo sacer* and pertinently asks: 'why certain subjects are structurally more susceptible to personifying its actualization' (Weheliye 2014: 35; see also pp. 33–44).
5. All cases of police murder are of course different and require specific analysis. Yet, as Giorgio Agamben notes, examples are 'neither universal nor particular' and reveal a 'singularity' (1990: 8; own translation) that is valid for other cases as well.
6. I had initially planned to use still frames to illustrate the dynamic of the killing as specifically as possible, as it is usually done to close read visual texts such as films. This proved to be impossible because of laws protecting rights of police body cam footage in the United States, a gray legal zone that is apparently uncomfortable even with academic analysis – for understandable yet not justifiable ethical reasons as it will become clear. As I am writing this, the footage can nonetheless be found online with a helpful commentary from *The New York Times*. I provide the exact timing in the video for key moments so the reader can view the scenes for themselves. See *The New York Times* (2020), *How a Police Encounter Turned Fatal: The Killing of Rayshard Brooks | Visual YouTube*, [Online Video]. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=chdTYo4NUh4&t=5s> [Last accessed: 24 August 2023].

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